# The Last Unicorn: Death and the Legacy of Fantasy

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**Video Link: https://youtu.be/M57VN_b9FRM**

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really got me making an hour-long video essay about mortality in a 1980s children's movie about unicorns, huh?
00:00 – Intro
05:16 - Making the Unicorn
14:54 - Story Breakdown
24:20 - Memento Mori
37:09 - Deaths and Legacies
47:52 - Outro I

did a super bad job of explaining the whole "on 2s" thing so uhhh no worries if you're confused by how i explained it. anyway, here is a list of the sources i used for this video; next time i think i'll try to add in-video footnotes or something:

- "The Unicorn" by Nancy Hathaway
- "The Anti-Consolation: Boethius and 'The Last Unicorn'" by Alexandra Hennessey Olsen
- "'Two Sides of the Same Magic': The Dialect of Mortality and Immortality in Peter S. Beagle's The Last Unicorn by Geoffrey Reiter
- "Humankind and Reality: Illusion and Self-Deception in Peter S. Beagle's Fiction" by Richard C. West
- "Innocence and Experience and the Imagination in the World of Peter Beagle" by John Pennington
- "Fantasy and Medieval Iconography in The Last Unicorn" by Noelle Taberham
- "Virgin Whore" by Emma Maggie Solberg
- "The Unicorn Tapestries" by the Metropolitan Museum of Art
-The Last Unicorn Book vs Movie https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=La4Ps...

# Transcript

wow [Music]
the last unicorn is a movie that makes many people uncomfortable even for a 1980s family film released
two years before the dawn of pg-13 is a rating it sticks with a lot of people as a particularly dark maybe even
traumatizing movie along with movies like the dark crystal is a shining example of the complaint that back in my
day kids movies weren't afraid to be weird and scary despite being regarded by some as

reagan-era nightmare fuel the last unicorn has become somewhat of a cult classic it's not exactly comparable to
the fairy tales of old which teach children how to behave by using gruesome punishments rather it demonstrates how a
person comes to terms with their own mortality and how death isn't necessarily a good or bad thing but how
mortality does underscore lasting legends and the art that they inspire the last unicorn in my view might come
across as dark because of its scary imagery but ultimately it provides a compelling demonstration of why human
mortality is such an important component of our experiences and cultures but before i talk about these serious
themes let's take a look at the past few years in particular i want to talk about the explosion of the unicorn trend a
trend that by now has mostly fizzled out after several years of intensity especially in kids products
part of the reason i think the last unicorn comes off as so dark and scary to people is because unicorns especially
now are generally associated with safety and comfort in a 2017 interview with lifestyle
website refinery29 brand strategist jess weiner had this to say about the unicorn frenzy sweeping across social media
we're surrounded by culture and politics that are very bleak and dark and oppressive unicorns are rare they're
powerful and they're imaginary so they're capable of anything and they do have a certain girly undertone because
many of us associate them with our childhood so they're unapologetically feminine why wouldn't we own something
that's just for us and inspires us to believe in our other worldly capabilities this article was published just one
month after starbucks had dropped its now infamous unicorn frappuccino which looked and tasted like a jar of sand art
according to google trends search queries around the word unicorn exploded during this time and before we knew it
america was plunged into a rainbow sprinkle abyss this is especially true a packaged snack
food i guess a lot of food companies decided to drop the shaky appeal to the great source of fiber messaging to
instead bulk by unicorn molds and pink food dye and start selling us on a whole new whimsical assortment of the same things we've been eating all along
[Music]
unicorns also became ubiquitous in the online beauty and fashion world paving the way for the mermaid witch and crystal trends that would follow in the
coming years in 2017 the same year starbucks released its sour glitter drink to sticky cup holders everywhere wet and wild released a unicorn collection of cosmetics tart released their unicorn brushes with
handles shaped like spiral horns and by selling it at 54. per 10 milliliter

bottle skincare brand farsali made an absolute killing selling unicorn essence which sounds like something i've
gathered in a quest in 2017 unicorn was the fourth most popular halloween costume in 2018 it was
the third most popular and the unicorn trend isn't unique mythical beasts and symbols are caught in a cycle of going in and out of fashion but unicorns differ from other popular beasts because of their transcendent rather than familiar
relationship to humans they're not usually pets not lovers and not adversaries yet they still make occasional appearances in media and popular culture despite their distance riding a unicorn for example is such an
absurd image it's basically a meme a dream shared only by horse girls and napoleon dynamite yet riding a dragon is
treated far more seriously so to speak and when it comes to branded named unicorns in american media many of us
might first think of my little pony characters and to be honest i couldn't remember if they had horns or not until i looked it up apparently some of horns
and some don't much like their 1980s predecessors the 2016 movie gets into some second-class citizen territory on
this topic after all these are my little ponies not my little unicorns
and unicorns are still often cast as helpful enchanted sidekicks and other kids titles
think lady rainicorn from adventure time or swiftwin from she-ra this lack of overtly branded unicorns is
interesting considering how unicorn is also a business term meaning a company valued at over a billion dollars
but like the snack foods name for them unicorns seem to be overwhelmingly associated with whimsy magic dreams
rainbows friendship themes we see a lot of in contemporary kids media they're a chance to escape to
use jess weiner's words and they're not really what many people think of when it comes to darkness horror or death
okay we've talked a lot about the sugary suicide squad year that was 2017. let's scoop back in time to the mid 20th
century when fantasy themed media was quietly thriving as a genre
[Music]
in 1962 when peter s beagle was just 23 he took a summer retreat to a cabin in
connecticut with a friend while there he drafted the beginnings of the last unicorn this draft would later be published as
the last unicorn the lost journey in 2006. but beagle struggled with the story despite the success he'd gotten from
publishing a fine and private place several years prior i read the lost journey while preparing for this video and it's honestly
wonderful despite the fact that it's incomplete the story takes place in the mid 20th century and the unicorn teams up with a
sarcastic two-headed demon who was kicked out of hell i'd recommend checking it out you can even see which passages were lifted
directly from this early draft and later used for the final edition in 1968 after

intensely struggling with the manuscript beagle would finally publish the last unicorn he went on to write many more
stories after that some of them also involving unicorns in fact in 2005 beagle published an official sequel in
the form of a short story titled two hearts it follows an entirely new protagonist though some of the
characters from the original book do make appearances and drop by to help beagle was eventually successful in
finding someone interested in buying the rights to his story sometime in the mid-1970s after buying the rights to the book the
last unicorn's associate producer michael chase walker struck a deal with rank and bass productions to make the
film adaptation peter beagle was originally not happy about this saying in a 2011 interview in animation magazine the reason i was so horrified at the notion of franken bass making the film was that i didn't like
anything of theirs that i'd ever seen however according to walker rankin bass was second to last on their list of
companies that might make the movie with hannah barbera being the absolute last choice
if you're from the united states you're probably familiar with rankin bass already especially if your taste in holiday films skews classic
the stop-motion holiday movies of the mid-20th century like rudolph the red-nosed reindeer jack frost the easter
bunny has come into town and 18 other titles were all produced by rank and bass from 1960 until the mid-1980s
most of these projects were outsourced to japan for filming with the company taking advantage of lower labor costs
overseas and by the mid-1970s rank and bass had settled on one animation studio
in particular they could take on almost all their stop-motion and animation projects the last unicorn was one of the final
projects completed by topcraft a japanese animation studio contracted by rank and bass to make the film
if the stylization of the movie seems familiar to you especially its character designs then you might have seen some of
topcraft's other feature-length films also produced by rank and bass the hobbit the return of the king and flight
of the dragons compared to other japanese animation studios topcraft was well equipped to
take on feature film projects as it possessed high quality studios and one of the few 35 millimeter multiplane
cameras in tokyo at the time as for its non-american projects topcraft had a resume of titles spanning
the 1970s and 1980s including work both on anime episodes and feature length projects but perhaps the company's most
memorable contribution to the world of animation came shortly before its collapse in the mid-1980s a little movie
called nausicaa of the valley of the wind following top crop's bankruptcy in 1985

hayao miyazaki scooped up what remained of the studio after dismissing most of the staff and renamed it studio ghibli
topcraft's high quality work is evident in the last unicorn's 70 thousand or so cells and richly hand-painted
backgrounds and while most western animated movies including disney are shot at 24 frames per second the last
unicorn is mostly shot at 12 frames per second this is more common in anime and it involves shooting the same frame
twice a technique called on twos animation that uses 24 frames per second
shoots on ones and certain scenes of the last unicorn were filmed on ones employing the more labor-intensive but more fluid style of animating when the scene called for it this is probably why the movie seems
kind of anime kind of not the last unicorn is also a highly referential work and i did want to briefly mention character designs here while most of the characters are designed around the same aesthetic we see in other topcraft productions made
for rank and bass the lady amalthea's design in particular stands out according to the audio commentary on the
enchanted edition blu-ray the movie's american producers weren't thrilled with how young and anime amalthea's original
design came across in early concept art so she got a redesign albeit one that still makes her stand out not only in
this movie but also against any other female character in other rank and bass movies more than anything her design seems to
borrow heavily from the main character of the belladonna of sadness a 1973 japanese psychedelic film about violence
sex and revenge but i'm getting too deep into anime history which can't be a good sign let's talk about the production peter beagle was no stranger to animated adaptations of high fantasy he'd
actually written the screenplay for ralph bakshi's the lord of the rings back in 1978 not to be confused with the
aforementioned rank and bass adaptations of the hobbit and return of the king this project while reportedly a
difficult and low-paying job according to beagle helped him prepare for the task of drafting the screenplay to his own novels adaptation in the early 1980s
rank and bass shuttered most of their production company in 1987 and wouldn't make another traditionally animated
theatrical feature film until their 1999 musical adaptation of the king and i which received terrible reviews and did
horribly at the box office rank and bass officially ceased operations in 2001
we killed itchy and scratchy good riddance the rankin bass foray in a fantasy in
the late 1970s and early 1980s is unsurprising the genre was seeing mainstream success at the time though it
took a much darker adult form than the medieval whimsy of disney movies of years past
this might have something to do with the spike in popularity of sword and sorcery fantasy films which leaned more into
action than they did elf politics or whatever in addition to the last unicorn 1982

also saw the release of two other dark fantasy movies made for kids the secret of nim and the dark crystal
both these films are also proud members of the back when 80s films were weird and scary club
but something about this genre still clearly resonates with people as the dark crystal recently saw a mini-series
reboot released on netflix in 2019 flight of the dragons also a rank and
bass topcraft animated fantasy film from 1982 also involved a mythical creature human transformation as its central
tension come anatomy astronomy biology chemistry
geology geometry mathematics meteorology mineralogy oceanography paleontology
physics psychology sociology
[Music]
hell even the rat decided it wanted a piece of the spooky fantasy pie with its release of the black cauldron in 1985.
unfortunately the film didn't do very well and to this day it's one of disney's bastard films with the company
barely acknowledging its existence even as a cult classic speaking of disappointments the last unicorn cost five million dollars to make and made back less than seven million at the box office making for an
underwhelming performance as a point of comparison the secret of nim had a budget of 7 million and made back close
to 15 million as for critical reviews it lost marks for the animation itself
according to the rotten tomatoes consensus the last unicorn lacks the fluid animation to truly sparkle
the av club perhaps picking up on the fact that the unicorn was sometimes animated on twos comments that she comes
across weightless and overly simplified and variety magazine liked the movie
overall but called the unicorn's design vapid even in the 80s your art teachers hated anime have you heard of hatsune
miku but most critics praised the film for its voice cast which featured mia pharaoh as the unicorn alan arkin as
schmendrick angelo lansbury as mommy fortuna and tammy grimes as molly grew the relatively unknown jeff bridges and
his eagerness to be part of the project offered to voice prince lear pro bono i practically got the whole poem now if
you wanted to look at it i'm the dude so that's what you call me you know
that or his dudeness or uh duder or you know el duterino if you're not into
the whole brevity thing bridges acted alongside christopher lee as king haggard luckily christopher lee was fluent in
german and he offered to also do the voice for king haggard in das lester einhorn
[Music]
critics also liked the music which was written by jimmy webb the first few songs in the movie were performed by the
rock band america with the final two songs one of them a love ballad sung by the characters
the animators who had access to the music before they began work on the movie incorporated the lyrics into their

visuals this is especially true of some of the background elements like animals and landscape speaking of backgrounds that just about wraps up the background of this film let's finally talk about the story itself
[Music]
okay so with the backstory of this film out of the way let's go over some of the main components of the plot i want to also bring up anything that might have
certain significance in the book though i don't want to focus too much on book versus movie besides someone else already made a video that covers all
that okay so i'll just watch this a few more times take notes okay and read all of this uh that's a lot and when you brush your teeth tonight use this cherry at toothbrush seriously we're treated to several background
paintings in the film's opening beagle writes of an unnamed unicorn who lives in a lilac wood but the movie takes some
liberties in how it plays with background color in these opening scenes most of the movie has a rather dark earthy palette but these scenes are full
of highly saturated hues that illustrate how it is always spring in the unicorn's forest
two hunters wander into her forest and debate the existence of unicorns with the elder hunter calling out into the
quiet stillness stay where you are poor beast this is no world for you keep your trees green and your friends
protected and good luck to you for you are the last then we finally see
the unicorn who is understandably upset by the news that her kind are basically extinct without her ever having realized
it while the unicorn is musing over the fate of her species she encounters a singing butterfly she begs him to tell
her if he's familiar with unicorns and what might have happened to them the butterfly who looks like a 60s beatnik is actually modeled after beagle himself
you can find the others if you are brave they passed down all the roads long ago and the red bull ran close behind them
and covered their footprints the red bull what is the red bull
his first thing bull has majesty and his horns are the horns of a wild ox
with them he shall push the unicorns all of them to the ends of the earth the unicorn decides to leave her forest
and try to find others like her it's here that she finally encounters a human who mistakes her for a horse and tries to catch her she realizes that
human beings don't recognize her for who she is or perhaps they've forgotten unicorns altogether there are at least some humans who recognize her though including an old witch named mommy for tuna she captures
the unicorn and imprisons her in a cage where she is kept as an attraction in a traveling carnival of mythical creatures
because humans can't recognize unicorns anymore mommy fortuna bewitches her with a false horn but luckily for the unicorn
the witch has employed a bumbling but pure-hearted magician named schmendrick who makes a few sad attempts at magic to release her
once she is released the unicorn gets to work releasing all the other animals who have also been disguised with magic

okay now it's time for arguably the most traumatic scene for a lot of people the
unicorn also frees a harpy who is immortal like herself and not under any kind of spell she's scary as and she die bombs
mommy for tuna and kills her [Applause]
[Music]
luckily schmedrick and the unicorn managed to escape briefly i should mention that in the book schmendrick's situation is a little
more fleshed out because he's literally so atrocious at magic he's been cursed with immortality until he can finally
get better it's like a warlock performance improvement plan speaking of schmendrick being kind of a
goober he and the unicorn are soon captured by a group of traveling bandits led by a braggadocious outlaw named captain cully schmendrick in a stroke of
luck is able to distract them with a spell that conjures up mirages of the robin hood legend but while most of the
bandits run after these apparitions captain cully isn't deceived and he has schmedrick tied to a tree who's ready
for more weird drama oh
[Music] i love you
schmendrick escapes thanks to the unicorn and the two hit the road again but they're intercepted by one of the bandits a woman named molly grew
molly instantly recognizes the unicorn for who she is and starts to cry
where have you been where have you been damn you
where have you been and where were you 20 years ago 10 years ago
where were you when i was new when i was one of those innocent young maidens you always come to
so this next part is probably where the book and movie deviate the most in the book the travelers have to pass through
hags gate before they can get to hagrid's castle hagsgate is a village at the foot of the castle and the trio are
surprised that the town is so well kept and peaceful but when they join some of the town's people for dinner in the
local tavern they learn that hagsgate has been hexed with a curse that their village will thrive with excellent
harvest seasons and abundant resources and money but the catch is that a child born from the village will one day go on
to bring its doom schmedrick proceeds to get blasted and say some dumb to the townspeople all of whom are middle-aged or older as they all decided to stop having children to prevent the prophecy from coming true
not sure what the long-term strategy was there and it didn't really work out because one child was born in secret and
then abandoned before being adopted by the king but i digress back to the movie one
night close to haggard's castle the party is finally confronted with the red bull terrified the unicorn begins to flee but
it quickly becomes clear that the bull is faster than her in a panic schmendrick cast a spell but whoops now

she has thumbs the unicorn freaks out but the three decide to continue on their quest with the unicorn's now human
body possibly protecting her from the bull for the time being they finally reach the castle which seems to only be populated by two people king haggard himself and his adopted son lear schmedrick introduces the unicorn as his niece lady amalthea and while haggard is skeptical he agrees to let the trio stay
in his castle for a while but not until after he fires the extremely pissed dude schmendrick is replacing come on old man
i'll write you a reference naturally lear falls in love with amalthea and he attempts to win her affections by slaying dragons and as he puts it doing great deeds as time wears on amalthea and lyric grow
closer and amalthea begins to forget her life as a unicorn she even forgets why she came to hagrid's castle in the first
place this change isn't lost on hagrid himself at one point he confronts amalthea
essentially accusing her betraying her true identity and making him out to be a fool but eventually he realizes that
amalthea the woman has almost entirely replaced whatever unicorn there once was
i said to the red bull i must have them i must have all of them all there are
for nothing makes me happy but they're shining
and their grace each time i see the unicorns
my unicorns it is like that morning in the woods and i am truly young
in spite of myself [Music]
you are the last my lord i do not understand thanks to molly gru's charming
conversation with a scullery cat she and schmendrick begin to crack the riddle around how to find the red bull's lair
which lies beneath haggard's castle i should mention that amalthea doesn't really help them at all and it's at this
point in the movie that her role becomes pretty passive anyway they descend to the dungeon and find a goofy skeleton
which was part of the cat's riddle answer the riddle then tell us the way say please
please no no
the skeleton mocks him at first but schmedrick is able to trick him into explaining the answer to the riddle by promising him whine
but despite his inebriation the skeleton suddenly recognizes amalthea and flips out calling for haggard they all run
into the clock which is the entrance to the passage with hagrid behind them but instead of following them inside he
smashes the clock trapping them lear is there too having followed amalthea when she left with the others
to descend into the dungeon amalthea begins to have doubts about the whole mission as she no longer remembers who
she is and doesn't have any interest in becoming a unicorn again but lear disagrees telling her that it's her
destiny to rescue the others the red bull begins to stir and presumably the spell on amalthea is no longer as effective at disguising her as the group tries to flee amalthea trips and falls and yet again in a moment of

desperation schmendrick mutters a few magic words now back in her original body the
unicorn runs out of the cave and onto the beach where the red bull follows her he tries driving her into the sea where
the other unicorns were driven long ago but as the bull chases her lear throws himself in his path the unicorn seeing this undergoes a sudden change rather than soberly trudge into the breaking waves she instead
rears up and edges closer toward the bull she forces the bull into the sea which prompts the crashing waves to
unleash thousands of unicorns onto the beach the stampede causes haggard's castle to collapse and king haggard with it
in the book this unicorn exodus also destroys hagsgate as a final act of grace the unicorn resurrects her dead boyfriend then gallops away before he wakes up in the last scene of the movie the unicorn appears to schmedrick again to
thank him before she leaves him and molly and begins the long journey back to her lilac forest
okay let's go back to my earlier comment about how mortality is a major component of this film well of course death is a component of
this film doesn't almost every type of narrative carry the threat of some kind of death be it physical or even
metaphorical i'm sure there are kids films way darker than this one but what has always made the last unicorn stand out to me is its framing of mortality sure other kids movies approach the subject of the
inevitability of death but in the world of the last unicorn death isn't exactly inevitable the unicorn is not just
magical she's outright immortal in the book beagle writes she was very old though she did not know it
to be clear while lots of kids movies depict grief that's not exactly what i'm talking about here the last unicorn lays
bare the frightening reality of one's own death and not one that is necessarily followed by an afterlife or
if there is an afterlife it might be a sub-optimal one barely resembling the experience of life and this is why it's
such an effective memento mori piece memento mori is a latin phrase that basically means remember you will die it
underscores some of the art in literature from the middle ages through the renaissance and the enlightenment especially through the lens of christianity its philosophical purpose
was to encourage people especially christians to be mindful of the temporal natures of their lives and to instead
focus on the divine and the eternal i.e god while none of the characters in the
film make any kind of overt reference to the christian afterlife they do seem extremely concerned with their legacy
while other villains and plenty of non-villains thirst for money power and even fame many of the antagonists in the
last unicorn are obsessed with what they will leave behind and how they will be remembered many of them shamelessly show
off and brag not necessarily because they want fans or money in this life but because they are concerned with the

lingering memory of their names and identities even false ones early on in the movie when the unicorn is traveling on man's road she's almost captured by a man who mistakes her for a horse not only does he
consider her obviously beautiful but he's already thinking about how he can exploit her for his own benefit and then
the unicorn is trapped and forced into a carnival less than 10 minutes later side note but in reality barnum and
bailey and ringling brothers had a real unicorn in their circus shows in 1985. it was a goat with a surgically altered
horn mommy fortuna is especially concerned with her own legacy she recognizes that what she's doing is selfish and
dangerous but it doesn't matter to her especially when humans are destined to die anyway the harpy and the unicorn are
both immortal creatures and because mommy fortuna captured them she knows that both beasts will remember her thus
extending her legacy and name into eternity oh she'll kill me one day or another
but she will remember forever that i caught her but i held a prisoner
so there's my immortality eh in the essay the dialect of mortality
and immortality and peter s beagle's the last unicorn jeffrey reiter claims that mommy fortuna's hope for immortality is
to be remembered forever to imprint her name upon the souls of the immortal beings she encounters
that is precisely mommy fortuna's problem she selfishly seeks to cling to her immortality so much so that it
literally kills her the book makes mommy fortuna's thirst for fame through immortal creatures even
more apparent but she much like molly grew actually harbors a hint of shame when she looks back at her wasted life
do you think i don't know what the true witchery is just because i do what i do
there's not a witch in the world hasn't laughed at mommy fortuna and her homemade horrors but there's not one of
them who would have did she participates in the carnival herself playing the personification of old age a legend
borrowed from norse mythology this disturbs the unicorn quite a bit and she finds herself gripped with fear the fear
of transients and a temporary body that will wither in age schmentrich and molly are the more humble of human characters unlike the film's antagonists schmedrick is incompetent and he's more than aware of
it my dear you deserve the services of a great wizard but i'm afraid you'll have to be glad of the aid of a second-rate
pickpocket
and molly considers herself to be far past her prime and therefore in a way tainted by her age and experiences the
unicorn in contrast is limited in what she can and can't feel i can never regret
i can feel sorrow but it's not the same thing and while the unicorn claims she can feel no

regret it is schmendrick and mali who carry their regrets and their shame with them throughout their human lives
meanwhile captain cully is maybe the best example of a character who is concerned with fame for superficial reasons he assumes schmendrick is
already familiar with his troop and seems totally content with indulging in his delusions in the book cully is even more of a fame
obsessed buffoon he's convinced that schmendrick is actually a famous folklorist in disguise and he's
desperate to show off so that he might be written about favorably my main goal is to blow up and then act like i don't
know nobody but it's also kali who rejects legends and stories robin hood is a myth
we are the reality beagle gave kelly some amazing lines in the book and they all betray how self-absorbed kelly is
speaking to schmetrick about how he loves to write songs about himself cully says one always hopes of course even now to
be collected to be verified annotated to have variant versions even to have one's
authenticity doubted as jeffrey writer points out kelly seeks to become immortal by imprinting himself
on the memories of future generations he crafts songs about himself deliberately archaic and highly embellished in the
hopes that his deeds may live on and even if these verses were preserved the cully of the songs bears no
resemblance to the real cowardly egomaniac cully so the true man would gain no real immortality at all
and even cully is well aware of the fact that the songs and poems he writes about himself are not accurate representations
of the truth but the ends justify the means according to kelly men have to have heroes but no man can ever be as
big as the need and so a legend grows around a grain of truth like a pearl
and there's at least one character who certainly doesn't rise to the need to fit his title interestingly enough king
hanger doesn't really seem concerned with fame or glory he's already king so i suppose he's reached the end of the
line as far as power is concerned and schmedrick has already heard so many stories about him this might explain why
almost nothing brings him happiness and why he spends his old age staring into the sea immortal creatures trapped
within a dark abyss but it's his son lear who strictly follows what one might consider the codes of chivalry
rather than feeling concerned with how he specifically might be remembered by future generations lear looks to the
past to knights and nobles who came before him to inform his behavior in the present he's kind of the epitome of
lawful good doing what he thinks is the right thing based on the legacy of others morals and good deeds he seems to

buy into the same conviction as captain kelly that men have to have heroes but perhaps unlike cully he believes that it
is possible for a single person to rise to the right occasion and it's no wonder that lear is so concerned with this given the film's
setting idealized and honorable behavior helped inform much of the art and poetry produced in western europe during the middle ages the movie itself even makes
references to art history like the references to the hunt of the unicorn at the beginning of the film the movie version edited out the hunters
replacing them instead with a split background in an editorial titled fantasy and medieval iconography in the last unicorn
noelle taberham argues that this is meant to illustrate the split in the unicorn psyche from her old life in her
forest to her human one in haggard's castle speaking of haggard's castle when
amalthea is beginning to succumb to her new human form she retreats to a roomful of paintings of unicorns though most men
may have forgotten unicorns they clearly live on in art tabraham even makes a connection between
the scene following the unicorn's transformation and la pieta or the compassion at first i thought this was a
little bit of a stretch but now i'm not so sure if the christ metaphor is as wacky as i originally thought the unicorn temporarily assumes a human form
after all despite her clearly superior existence and is forced to reckon with the truth of her own mortality and the
scene is pretty long so the audience has time to mourn for the unicorn as molly cradles her in her arms
later her sacrifice of her human form frees thousands of her fellow creatures also adaptations of la pieta are
apparently a thing okay so the connection between unicorns and christianity is something you can find across medieval art in history but
in the context of the unicorn tapestries many art historians see these tapestries as allegories for the crucifixion with
the mystical unicorn being lured to the lap of a virgin only to be slaughtered by a group of hunters the unicorn's body
is brought back to a castle where it will likely be used for medicinal purposes by the nobility who live there
after all humans attempting to kill them to seize immortality for themselves is also a trope attached to unicorns that
persist to this day christian themes define medieval memento mori art and literature as well during a
time when life expectancy was pretty bad and living conditions even for the wealthy were not guaranteed to provide comfort momentum mori kind of served as
a christian rebranding of the philosophy of stoicism through its symbols this style of art and literature warned
people of the mortal world not to get too attached to their earthly existence and to remember that divine eternity
awaited them be it divine bliss or divine punishment it's actually due in part to the

protestant reformation that we saw art of unicorns fall out of fashion going into the 15th century unicorns had been
used as symbols for christ and protestant reformers weren't keen on the idea of iconography which played a big
role in catholic tradition but the 1563 council of trent decreed that symbolic depictions of christ were
unacceptable unless approved by bishops and thus we saw unicorns begin to fade in europe but unlike many myths and
legends that have been lost to time over centuries the unicorn remained in the public consciousness thought of by most
as a rare creature that did actually exist and that might have powers but it wasn't really regarded as a divine
metaphor as much speaking of symbols and metaphors some quick trivia the name of malthia is borrowed from the first named unicorn of greek mythology hidden from his father kronos the infant zeus nursed from a
goat named amalthea on the island of crete one day he broke off one of the goat's horns thus her being a unicorn he
blessed the horn and called it a cornucopia or horn of abundance and to this day it represents plentiful food
and good harvest remember the scary-ass harpy that everyone credits is wrecking knights of sleep for countless kids her name celeno
like amalthea is also a reference to greek mythology though fittingly a much darker one according to virgil's aeneid
celino is a prophet herself warning aeneas that his men will starve before they reach the end of their journey as
punishment for killing her sisters but it's the unicorn who prophesizes doom in the film
your death sits in that cage and she hears you this isn't the only time death is so overtly brought up in the movie
its darkness sneaks into other scenes reminding both characters and the audience of the approaching horizon of
death i would not be you for all the world you have let your doom in by the front door
but it will not depart that way and yeah prophecies about death and doom aren't exactly unique to the last
unicorn either that alone would hardly make it an effective piece of memento mori but the film also employs classic
visual cues found in art going back centuries the drunk skull in haggard's dungeon is probably the most glaring example of
traditional memento mori in the film this is even more obvious in the book when the skull complains when i was
alive i believed as you do that time was at least as real and solid as myself and
probably more so i said one o'clock as though i could see it and monday as though i could find it on the map and i let myself be hurried along from minute to minute day to day year to year as though i were actually
moving from one place to another like everyone else i lived in a house bricked up with seconds and minutes

weekends and new year's days and i never went outside until i died because there was no other door
now i know that i could have walked through walls of course walking through walls is referencing the fact that to solve the riddle schmendrick and molly just needed to figure out that they needed to physically walk through haggard's big
weird clock to get to the red bull's lair to reach the red bull you have to walk through time a clock is in time it's
just numbers and springs pay it no mind just walk right on through about that
wine now speaking of which clocks are another example of memento mori and art with
clocks from the middle ages often inscribed with macabre reminders clocks and other indications of time are
not uncommon in memento mori art plus hagrid also has the biggest most gargoyle-covered clock i'm sure he could
find which makes the whole effect even more dark and sinister
while i've talked a lot about this film's heavier moments i want to focus now on what has always been the most chilling line of any film to me
it happened shortly after schmendrick turns the unicorn into a human when she wakes up and pulls away from molly's
embrace the gravity of her new existence suddenly becomes terrifyingly obvious and immutable i wish you would let the
red bull take me i wish you had left me to the harpy
i can feel this body dying all around me her screams echo martin heidegger man
dies constantly until the moment of his demise i don't want to pivot to talking about heidegger and being towards death here
because quite frankly i'm not smart enough but it does provide a compelling framework for understanding what the
unicorn is feeling in extremely basic terms heidegger's view was that awareness of one's own unique death was
essential to authentic human experience and that enlightened individuals or those who face this reality as death is
the only thing in a person's life that is guaranteed to happen and this scene is the only time i can really think of that a young protagonist in a kid's movie suddenly realizes that their time on earth is limited and that
their body will begin to decay again this isn't to say that protagonist death isn't something handled by other
kids movies but in this case amalthea's death is both distant to us and unbearably close to her
this is heavy stuff for a kid to grapple with and in a way it's even harder for adults after all isn't the horizon of
death closer to us than it is to them is it
terrifying no i don't think so it's the way it is you know
everything must come to an end the drip finally stops
see you on the other side oh bojack no there is no other side
this is it the unicorn's realization of her impending death called mortal salience
if you go by terror management theory is even more pronounced in the book in beagle's text her fate is foreshadowed

by a tale shmetric telsar about how his master once turned a unicorn into a human man so that he could escape
hunters the man lived a noble and happy life and he died peacefully in old age but the
unicorn is sharply critical of this tale saying the magician did him no service but great ill
how terrible it would be if all my people had been turned human by well-meaning wizards exiled trapped in
burning houses i would sooner find that the red bull had killed them all to her it's worse to be trapped in a
human body a burning house aware of the horizon of death and obsessed with leaving some smudge of legacy on the
world than it is to be outright killed in the movie and certainly in the book the unicorn holds human beings in a kind
of pitying contempt molly even gently scolds her for this saying she wishes the unicorn could experience what it's
like to be mortal and schmendrick cursed with immortality he never wanted in the first place explains i know something
that a unicorn cannot know whatever can die is beautiful more beautiful than a unicorn who lives forever and who is the
most beautiful creature in the world schmendrick's gentle correction comes from his own sorrow at being immortal
against his will it's not clear exactly how old he is but he proclaims proudly that he is the last
of his own kind as well perhaps he has been carrying his own grief for many years
the book relies much more heavily on the theme of beauty as linked to the unicorn's immortality than the movie does
for example in the book when the unicorn is first turned into a human she cries i would have chosen any other than this
for my prison a rhinoceros is as ugly as a human being and it too is going to die but at least it never thinks that it is
beautiful this body is dying i can feel it rotting all around me how can anything that is going to die be real
how can it be truly beautiful but the film does offer its characters the ability to make sense of their lives
and their purpose so that they don't descend into the kind of despair that haunts the lady amalthea while the antagonists are concerned with fame
manufactured or not the protagonists accept that they must follow set paths doing things the way they ought to be
done according to custom into history which after all is its own kind of legacy albeit one forged by others that
came before consider how the unicorn despite the danger around being captured never
strays from the main road she follows there's even a whole song dedicated to it she sleeps literally right off the
side of the road and it's because of this that she has captured and probably why schmendrick is captured later on
they don't depart from the given path and they also don't depart from what they believe to be their own fairy tale

lear is the most self-aware out of all of them when it comes to understanding what he should do within this context it
dictates his every action in the movie right down to writing poetry that he clearly doesn't enjoy and isn't good at
but it's what chivalry requires of him and therefore he does it without ever questioning and once amalthea gets with
the program she recognizes this in lear and she falls in love with him in fact during their duet amaltia is
singing the lines from her earlier ballad now that i'm a woman as lear sings to her she warbles everything has changed but by the end of the song she looks to him and sings now i know the way
the path she'd been following the entire movie led her not just to the location of her people but also to the human man
she feels destined to fall in love with and this connection with tradition and chivalry kind of makes lear a jerk
well of course you're of noble birth anybody can see that i mean you can't really be that that ridiculous
magician's niece gets out of the question like schmendrick is the whole reason that malthia exists as a human in
the first place her noble birth is her waking up fully grown in a swamp and it's lear's connection to the hero
myth this chivalrous path that binds him to his own mortality [Music]
i am a hero and heroes know that things must happen when it is time for them to happen
a quest may not simply be abandoned unicorns may go unrescued for a long time but
not forever the happy ending cannot come in the middle of the story do something you
have the power i will kill you if you don't do something i cannot not all the magic in
the world can help her now then what is magic for that's what heroes are for
of course that is exactly what heroes are for kind of sucks that he would effectively doom another creature to a life of
immortality never to feel true love again amaltia states that everything dies essentially justifying the
necessity of her own mortality she's offering both to sacrifice her immortality for lear while also willingly choosing a life for herself that will guarantee her the ability to feel romantic love something she can't
experience as a unicorn both lear and amalthea rely on teleology to justify what they want both appealing
to the natural order of things but a malthus destiny perhaps determined by magic at the hands of schmendrick is
inescapable in fact freeing the other unicorns takes a bit of a back seat after the first half of the movie while nightmares of
her kind being chased by the red bull plagued the unicorn once she finds herself in a mortal body she doesn't really consider their plight or why
someone anyone should free them in the first place perhaps the heaviness of her mortality pushes her towards selfishness or
perhaps she simply finds it difficult to empathize with creatures who will live forever be it on land or in the sea

and immortal creatures like unicorns have no need for stories legacies myths or fairy tales but these fairy tales
take me away from the harsh reality of peasant life according to the book they typically live alone in their forests
the red bull may have covered their footprints when he chased them into the sea but did they have anything that they were leaving behind in the first place
the book also contains an interesting line from schmendrick who while arguing with amalthea in the red bull's lair
asks is the world any the worst for losing the unicorns and would it be any better if they were running free again
one good woman more in the world is worth every single unicorn gone let it end marry the prince and live happily
ever after and this leads me to my next question what's really at stake if the unicorn of
the story never saves her people she was forced into it because of schmendrick's magic but surely there
must be something to account for why an immortal creature would when faced with a short human life choose to embrace
that life in the book there's even a line about how she mourns more for the human girl who could never be brought back than she
does for lear the human life she saw stretching out before her meeting the horizon of certain death had been rerouted
i'm no longer like the others for no unicorn was ever born who could regret
but now i do i regret now while all of this is the result of
that one line of amaltius that always stuck with me i'd like to end on one last section from the book
in my opinion it's the most haunting and terrifying thing to come out of either the book or the movie the unicorn in her
immortality is living a truly sublime experience when she leaves the comfort of her forest and is privy to the
vastness of the world and the deep relationships of the people in it in this scene the unicorn schmendrick
and mali stop to rest beagle writes she would feel herself bending under the heaviness of knowing
their names then she would run until morning to ease the ache swifter than rain swift as loss racing to catch up
with the time when she had known nothing at all but the sweetness of being herself often then between the rush of
one breath and the reach of another it came to her that schmedrick and molly were long dead and king haggard as well
and the red bull met and mastered so long ago that the grandchildren of the stars that had seen it all happen
were withering now turning to coal and that she was the only unicorn left in the world
what you're afraid of is the unknown [Music] don't be afraid
but i am afraid the running's over
it's time to rest
give me your hand but i don't want to die

trust me
[Music]
you see no shock no
engulfment no tearing asunder what you feared would come like an
explosion is like a whisper
it probably feels like the stars have all withered and died since the beginning of this long ass video but to close i wanted to return to the comment
made by one of the hunters at the beginning of the story this is no world for you it reminds me of another line said by an
erotic dragon character in the rough draft of the book the lost journey the dragon mocks the unicorn claiming that
hers is a myth that was always more trouble than it was worth he's certainly speaking through the lens of a 20th century cynicism a cynicism that in my
opinion has only intensified over the decades books are stupid i thought books were smart no they're stupid for all of
its legacy magic and even divinity is the unicorn truly an immortal creature
does it fulfill some kind of present-day societal need does its myth represent some kind of lingering anxiety
while the last unicorn may live on in people's memories as a scary or whimsical or campy or brilliant animated
movie it focuses on a myth of the unicorn that was already waning and had been for a very long time like i
mentioned earlier unicorns are almost exclusively confined to the realm of children's media especially since the launch of my little pony toys in 1982
the same year the last unicorn was released and given the choice between a unicorn terrified by the emptiness of
her immortal existence and the sugary marketability of a smiling plastic pony who wouldn't want their kids to take the
more positive path into fantasy worlds
the last unicorn's poor performance and relative lack of popularity isn't really what i think of as the big shame here
nor is it that brand strategists equate unicorns with getting people to buy stuff and just to be clear i for one am
not above the pink and the sparkles modern day unicorns aren't to my taste but the aesthetics around them still
really get me oh hey is that princess unicorn i thought they were all sold out they are now cool my horn can pierce the sky what i think of as a big shame is how
although people ascribe so much darkness and despair to this movie which it invariably has
it's fundamentally about overcoming the anxiety around death it explores why the idea of myth and
legacy and even music and art history are so important not just to medieval european culture but to modern fans of
fantasy and animation in his book on death anxiety ernest becker claims
this is the terror to have emerged from nothing to have a name consciousness of self deep inner feelings and
excruciating inner yearning for life and self-expression and with all this yet to

die the last unicorn is a film about springing into being becoming self-aware
and developing an identity and wanting to express passion and creativity in a way that other people who are just as
flawed and mortal as anyone else can find meaning in the unicorn's fate to wander the earth remembering love and
feeling regret yet knowing she can never share these feelings with her mythically perfect and innocent people is the cage
that truly traps her one that will persist long after her forest has vanished and the stars in the sky have
burned themselves out [Music]
[Music]
so [Music]
you